

## **Rosh Hashanah Day 1** **Hazak ve-ematz**

Shanah tovah.

This isn't really the sermon I wanted to give today. You're going to get that one tomorrow - it's the one I planned and have been outlining since the beginning of the summer. It's part of a series based on the idea I first opened up at Selihot, that this season of the year is the season in which we renew our hearts, when we develop a *lev hadash*.

But since I began that planning process back in the early summer, the world in which we live has taken an additional turn that demands to be addressed from here, from the Bimah, with the fullest numbers of people present, on this, one of the most important and most sacred days of the Jewish year.

We are all aware of how the climate in which we live has become progressively more inflamed over the past months. We have seen the manifestations and the effects of criticism and discord. We have listened to - indeed, we might feel bombarded by - opinions that purport to be news and to news that purports to be factual but is anything but.

Looking back, we can see another shape also. Like pins in a map, with hindsight we can thread strings between events and decisions that display some of the ugliest aspects of human nature.

But on the whole, the worst of these things were happening to people who were not us.

Until, that is, the events in Charlottesville on August 12. On that day, as all of us likely remember very well, members of various sects of the white supremacy movement gathered - ostensibly to protest the removal of a Confederate statue but in truth to proclaim their rage and hatred. The rally resulted in the deaths of Heather Heyer, Berke Bates and H. Jay Cullen and at least 19 injured.

I cannot forget the photographs of that weekend. I cannot forget the flames from the tiki torches, the faces with their square, open mouths chanting contemporary slogans - *Jews will not replace us* - and others, *Blood and soil* - that we thought had been consigned to history. I cannot forget a photograph I saw from a 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville a month previously of a black police officer, head slightly bowed, guarding a barrier while Confederate flags swirled behind him and angry, shouting people gave the straight-armed salute. Like my Los Angeles colleague, Rabbi Sharon Brous, who I heard speak the week after the march, I thought that I would never use the word 'Nazi' in anything other than a historical sense; like her, I was wrong.

Antisemitism is one of the world's oldest hatreds. And like other old hatreds, it is one that resists every effort to expunge it. In small amounts, at the extremes of the scale, it's always been there - in the country in which I was brought up, and in this country too. And perhaps it will never be entirely eradicated. But what has changed - dangerously - is that it has once again become permissible for it to enter mainstream discourse. It has made its way out of the dark corners in which it used to live. Its authors and fomenters are abusing this country's sacred freedoms of assembly and of speech to march it down the main street in all of its chilling horror.

I spoke last night of how we animate the shofar with our breath. This year as we stand to hear its cry, we might well associate its sound with one of its ancient purposes. Sa'adia Gaon, the ninth-century rabbi and philosopher, teaches that one of the ten reasons for blowing the Shofar is to sound the alarm. The prophet Jeremiah cries:

*My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent, for I hear the sound of the shofar [kol shofar], the alarm of war [teruat milhamah].* Jeremiah 4:19

Since Charlottesville, I have repeatedly been hearing that alarm. I know you have too.

But I think the more difficult question is how we should react to it.

I have been combing the High Holyday liturgy trying to find us a response that feels sincerely and squarely grounded in our sacred tradition. I believe that at a time like this it is all the more important to draw our strength from its wisdom.

But this proved to be surprisingly challenging. Perhaps it is because the liturgy of the High Holydays is so exalted; perhaps it's because I think of it as referring more to our inner spiritual work than world events. It took me a little time to realize that I was looking in the wrong place - or at least, not quite the right one.

I believe that the text that speaks to us is not in the main liturgy of the High Holydays itself, but rather, encircles it. At the beginning of the month of Elul we begin to recite psalm 27 - *Adonai ori ve-yishi*, God is my light and my strength. The psalm ends with the line *hazak ve-ametz libekha ve-kaveh el Adonai* - be strong, be strong and hope in God.

And in the most ignored haftarah of the year - the one we read on Simchat Torah - we find the same pattern. Four times in the first paragraph of the book, Joshua is commanded with variants on the words *hazak ve-emetz*.

*hazak ve-emetz, I [God] will not leave you [1:5]*

*hazak ve-emetz, you will carry out my promise to give this land to this people [1:6]*

*hazak ve-emetz, be careful to do all my servant Moses commanded you [1:7]*

*hazak ve-emetz, do not be frightened and do not be dismayed... [1:9]*

*Hazak ve-emetz*. Two words that encircle this season. Two words that seem to mean the same thing - be strong and be strong. *Hazak ve-emetz* is a double commandment. And whenever the Torah repeats itself, we should be asking ourselves why.

I think we can reveal the answer by looking more closely at the types of strength these two words represent.

*Hazak* really does mean to be physically strong. It carries with it a sense of force, of grabbing, pressing, prevailing - the kind of strength you need for wrestling. It's used of hands, of arms, and figuratively, of royal power. All of these strengths are useful resources for us to draw on at a time of alarm. We will face this coming year better if we remind ourselves that we can't just be mown down, that we have autonomy, that we can fight.

But *hazak* also carries some negative connotations. We might remember that when Pharaoh hardens his heart, and also when God does it for him, the word *hazak* is used. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his etymological dictionary of Biblical Hebrew, links *hazak* to *hashach*, the word for darkness.

*Hazak* is a natural way for us to express ourselves. It feels like a good answer to our rage and fear. But I suggest we need to be careful. Remember Pharaoh, remember the darkness. *Hazak* leaves us susceptible to being hijacked by the very techniques our enemies are using. Before we know it, if we are not careful, we too could be spouting hatred. Before we know it, if we let our own sense of power go to our heads, we too could give way to violence.

And perhaps that is why the Torah gives its message to strengthen ourselves in two ways. Not just *hazak* but also *ematz*.

*Ematz* is quite different from *hazak*. Its root sense suggests gathering, drawing together, squeezing. It means to be bold, to be alert. It is even used of strong colors in the sense of being concentrated. *Ematz* is not only about being strong but about being secure. It is the inner process of mustering not just any reaction but the right reaction - coming from a place of fearless clarity. Awareness, discipline, honesty, empathy, discernment - all of these are our resources on which we draw to conquer our fear, in the knowledge that these battles present us with the choice to be a *hillul HaShem*, a disgrace to our tradition, or to make it glorious. To be *ematz* is to be not only a physical but a spiritual warrior.

The purpose of all of the inner work we do on RH and YK is to remind us of who we really are. The alarm call of the Shofar calls us to put forward our fullest and truest selves. *Ematz* offers us the possibility of allowing our reactions to elevate us rather than destroy us.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that I thought it would be the odd one out in a series about renewing our hearts. But it isn't. Our English word courage comes from the Latin and French *cor/coeur* - heart. The Hebrew word for courage is *ometz lev* - the word *ematz* applied to the heart. *Hazak ve-ematz* really means 'be strong and courageous.' Strength infused with the power of the heart.

Between the first *hazak ve-ematz* of this season, in Psalm 27, and the last, in the book of Joshua, we can prepare ourselves to engage with the world's ugliness this year.

The Torah is teaching us what our weapons are.

From the psalm we draw hope - the slender thread on which even a mountain can hang.

From the book of Joshua - first, we are not alone. Second, we can walk forward and continue with our plans. Third we can rely on our tradition. And fourth, we will not allow circumstances to shake us.

I think it is likely that we will disagree about how to be *hazak ve-ematz*. And that is fine. We will do so civilly. We will do so in a way that our tradition – which has never been frightened by disagreement - has been doing for centuries.

But I hope we will not disagree, this year, about calling evil by its name. And I hope we will not let our enemies divide us. I hope that we will be able to see past our own fear to extend our compassion and our strength to others who are under threat, who are more vulnerable than we are (more about that tomorrow).

But for today - *hazak ve-ematz ve-al tehat*.

May the sound of the Shofar speak to our hearts, giving us both strength and courage.

And may it be a good year for us, and for the world.  
Shanah tovah.